

The McNary Lock and Dam

WHO WAS CHARLES McNARY?

Charles Linza McNary was born on June 12, 1874, near Salem, Oregon, and was a direct descendant of pioneers. Both of his grandfathers had come west on the Oregon Trail, and established homesteads in the Willamette Valley. He first attended elementary school in a one-room schoolhouse in Keizer, Oregon; and when he went to high school in Salem, friends included Oswald West, who later served as Governor of Oregon, and Herbert Hoover, who went on to be elected President of the United States.

Located near Umatilla, Oregon, the McNary Lock and Dam was dedicated in 1954 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In his dedication speech, the President cited Charles L. McNary's lifetime achievements and contributions in and for the Pacific Northwest, the U.S. Senate, and his role in the development of the hydroelectric power industry on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. McNary Lock and Dam is named in his honor.

McNary always valued a good education. His college career started with business courses at Capitol Business College and Willamette University in Salem, but he soon grew bored with business studies and enrolled at Stanford University (California) in 1896. McNary transferred back to Willamette University after two years at Stanford, in order to study closer to his home and family. He passed the Oregon Bar in 1898 and became a full partner in his brother's Salem law firm.

After he had established himself as a successful attorney, he began developing several of his other interests and ideas. By 1909 he was well known as an innovator in farming throughout the Willamette Valley. It was McNary who introduced filberts to the Pacific Northwest. Filberts had been known to prosper only in balmy regions such as near the Mediterranean Sea in Europe, but McNary brought them to the Willamette Valley and proved that they could be grown successfully. Not limiting himself to farming, McNary also taught law courses at Willamette University; and served as Dean of the Willamette University College of Law from 1908-1913.

Wishing to further his interests in serving the public and pursuing his growing political ambitions, McNary accepted an appointment to the Oregon Supreme Court in 1913. He was known as a judicial activist who was an advocate of progressive reform, occupational safety, worker's rights, and the 8-hour work day.



Oregon State Archives

In 1917 McNary was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fill a vacancy resulting from the death of fellow Oregon Republican, Senator Harry Lane. That appointment marked the beginning of McNary's career in the Senate, where he served for a total of 26 years.

As the United States moved into the Depression era in the late 1920s, McNary established himself as an advocate for farmers and other victims of the Depression. When his old friend Herbert Hoover was elected President in 1928, McNary was offered the opportunity to serve as either Secretary of Agriculture or Secretary of the Interior. He refused both positions, stating he thought he would be more effective and a better advocate for the people if he remained in the U.S. Senate.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President in 1933, McNary was one of very few Republican supporters of the new Democratic President, and the New Deal that would ultimately bring the U.S. out of the Depression. He soon built a great friendship and excellent working relationship with the President, and it was with Roosevelt's support that McNary was finally able to begin building on his ambitions to develop hydroelectricity on the Columbia and Snake rivers. The first project, the Bonneville Lock and Dam, was completed largely as a result of McNary's persistence. Charles L. McNary died in February of 1944 after battling a brain tumor.

(Biographical data courtesy of McNary of Oregon, A Political Biography, Steve Neal. Western Imprints, The Press of the Oregon Historical Society; 1985.)